After 47 years, Seafood Grotto will be deep-sixed

By Ingrid Nordemar
Staff writer

Steam clouds rise from the crab cooking pot, tinging the air with salt and the smell of the ocean.

A white-clad young man removes the boiled crustaceans from the pot and cracks the shells on a water-slicked steel counter, before wrapping the crabs in paper for the waiting customers.

Welcome to Lafayette's Seafood Grotto where Contra Costans have obtained fresh crab, fish, clams, oysters and prawns for 47 years. Wander into the restaurant for a meal, talk to the locals who have been coming here since the beginning.

But do it soon: The Seafood Grotto will close Dec. 8.

"It's time, it's just time to make a change," Diane Panfili said. "It's easy to say, 'one more year, one more year,' but I'm ready for something different."

The Grotto's lease is expiring and Panfili had planned to buy the building. Instead, she decided to retire.

"I want to relax, I want to stop and smell the roses. I've been running this place for the past five years," she said.

Panfili owns an office building and a house she rents so "I'll still have some work to do," she said. But not full time. She will find a school for her husband, who was disabled in a 1985 boating accident, spend time at the beach and generally "get my life in order."

Monterey fisherman

The restaurant and seafood stand are a family affair. Panfili's father in law, Adolph, had been a fisherman in Monterey during the 1940s sardine run made famous in John Steinbeck's books, but "when the sardines left, so did he," Panfili said.

Sun photo/ David Allen

Diane Panfili: 'I'm ready for something different.'

Adolph Panfili lived in San Francisco's North Beach and sold seafood in Contra Costa County, going all the way to Danville with his wares. About 1946, he opened a crab stand on Mt. Diablo Boulevard, where Bank of America is now.

Meaningful murals

In 1951, he rented a space next to a grocery store — at the Grotto's present location — and moved his family to the city. When the store closed, Adolph Panfili leased the space, and opened the restaurant. Even the murals on the walls date from that period, depicting the founder's life.

"My son's fiance's parents used to bring her here as a baby, in a carrier," Panfili said. "They tell us how they would put her on the table and she'd look at the murals."

Panfili married Gaetano "Sonny" Panfili in 1958 and their son, Dean, was born the following year. The baby came on a Friday night and, when Adolph Panfili learned he was a grandfather, he shouted the news out to all the customers and "brought the house down," according to Panfili. Most knew the family well, she said.

In 1964, Diane and Sonny Panfili became partners in the Seafood Grotto with Adolph Panfili and his wife, Barbara.

The younger Panfilis took over the Grotto after Adolph Panfili's death in 1967. In April 1985, Sonny and Dean Panfili were injured in a boating accident. The father sustained head injuries, while the son had a broken back. He is still partially paralyzed and cannot do any heavy lifting.

Panfili's daughter, Dana, managed the Grotto for about five months until her mother could take over.

They couldn't have coped without the support of their staff and customers, Panfili said.

"They were incredible. It was a highly emotional situation and the restaurant was a place of support for us both," Panfili said, her voice breaking.

Indeed, long-time customers still talk about the tragedy.

"It was terrible accident," Gertrude Brown said. "They didn't expect him (Sonny) to live."

A blow to the regulars

The Browns, Gertrude and Eugene, have been regulars at the Grotto since it opened and were distressed to learn of Panfili's decision to retire.

"You've got to be kidding," Gertrude Brown said. "Goodness, this place has been here forever. They can't do that to us. We'll have to come here at least a couple of times more."

Later, she joked she would go to Panfili's home for meals.

"All the customers say that," Panfili said.

The Grotto has the freshest fish, according to Lester Lloyd, another regular since 1952.

"Once Diane had fish left over from the weekend and she dumped it, said it was no longer fresh," he said.

Lloyd said he returned to the restaurant week after week "for the past half-hundred years or so" because of both the food and the atmosphere.

"It's a comfortable place. You come here to relax," he said.

"To relax and to meet people," Eugene Brown agreed.

Mutual respect and cooperation among the staff helped make the Grotto a good place to be, Panfili said. One of the waitresses, Ruth Monaco, worked at the restaurant when Panfili was 14 and is there now. The kitchen personnel, Joe and Rafael Lopez, "can cook crab like no one else can." Manager Steven Landridge can run any fish market, according to Panfili.

"They are all great," she said.

Many local teens have worked at the Grotto in high school and college. Mike Heckmann and Tony McDonald began by busing tables at 17, then helped in the kitchen and at the seafood stand. Heckmann managed the restaurant in 1987-88 and McDonald worked as a bartender.

"Diane helped us get through college," McDonald said. "It was ideal to work here and go to school. She's helped everybody who's ever lived here (in Lafayette."

"It will be a sad day when she retires," Heckmann said.

Crab for Christmas

With the restaurant's closing, the Christmas Crab tradition will pass into oblivion.

Starting in early December, customers call with orders for crabs for their Christmas Day dinner. The Panfilis order up to 10,000 pounds of the crustaceans.

"Sometimes we get as many as 600 orders," Panfili said. "We have to stop them at some point, to be sure we can fill them."

On Dec. 23, family and employees crack crabs into the late night hours. The next day, the orders are numbered and placed on the tables. Other seafood orders are numbered as well and kept in the kitchen. As customers come in, the restaurant staff finds the orders by the numbers.

"It was the funnest and most grueling experience we had," McDonald said.

Too tired to sleep

Dana Panfili agreed, adding that, by the time they returned home after the Christmas Crab. the family members were so tired, they couldn't celebrate the holidays. They just slept.

"I want the customers to understand why we won't be doing the Christmas Crab this year," Panfili said. "My son is getting married in February, and Dana asked for one Christmas as a regular family."

With the Grotto's closing, Contra Costa will lose its only outdoor crab cooking pot, unless someone takes over it within a short amount of time. The pot was "grandfathered in," Panfili said. There are regulations against outdoors cooking for restaurants and stands, but the crab stand existed long before the law.

Panfili decided against selling the business' name, since the restaurant had always belonged to the Panfili family. There might some day be another restaurant at 3606 Mt. Diablo Boulevard, but it won't be the Seafood Grotto.